National Landscape Conservation System Summit
November 16, 2010 Focus Group Sessions

Focus Group 1: Striving for Sustainability—Seeking Solutions for Resource Protection and Compatible Uses
Note: This document summarizes comments from both BLM employees and non-BLM stakeholders during three focus group sessions held on November 16, 2010. These comments represent neither the consensus opinions of the group attending the session nor the official positions of the BLM.

Defining protection and expectations for National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) lands

- Protection means:

    o Whatever the designating authority for a particular unit says it means (such as the Wilderness Act, presidential proclamations, etc.). Each unit has a unique mandate, which should be referred to constantly and consistently.

    o Different things to different people: refer to other agencies and organizations depending on context (e.g. US Fish and Wildlife Service for threatened and endangered species).

    o Allowing compatible uses, as opposed to traditional "multiple use" as BLM has applied it; or, multiple use means conservation; or, the conservation end of the multiple use spectrum.

    o Protection does not necessarily mean absolute protection (every single tree or feature) but rather an ecosystem or landscape level of the "objects and values"– a maintain or enhance standard where acceptable change thresholds are established, monitored, and managed for.

    o Conservation, enhancement (both resources and experience), sustainability – at the conservation end of the multiple use spectrum.

    o Recognition that some activities or uses may have short term or minimal effects to resources and can be managed or limited/mitigated to sustain the long-term condition or protection of resources/values.

    o Removing threats to the objects, resources, and values for which units were designated. It's also about the landscape. Range of opinions from managing use within thresholds for objects alone to allowing changes to ensuring unchanged landscapes for future generations.

    o Establishing a setting where experiences can happen now and in the future.

    o What does it mean in the "system" context? Christmas tree analogy: stand is RMP, trunk is BLM, branches are NLCS units, ornaments are the objects, values, and resources.

    o Sustained and sustainable – not degraded – ecosystem and features, including riparian, visual, biological, etc. Resiliency, viability, adaptable. Protection is a living process.

    o Values include natural, cultural, historical, experiential, recreational, scientific, etc. resources – not just natural.

- Expectations for NLCS and its units include:

    o Primacy of establishing authorities (proclamations and legislation); Omnibus Public Land Management Act, Federal Land Policy and Management Act--work priorities should be based hierarchically on these authorities. Each establishing authority treats protection differently, so manage that way. Purposes for designation should drive management.

- National policy should recognize, and where possible provide guidance to address, differences in the laws and the places themselves, providing a consistent vision and approach as to how to interpret the mandates, but still keep the system place-based. Where laws are ambiguous, actions within BLM's discretion should focus on the principles of conservation and the BLM should use the planning process to resolve them. In order for NLCS to be a system, there should be national policies, but they should not be one-size-fits-all where practicable.

- Interests of local communities are very important and need to be honored. Also, these lands are nationally significant and belong to the nation, so it's important to include national interest groups' consideration along with local communities when engaging and considering the input of communities of interest. Think beyond conventional definitions of "community." Recognize that locals can be and are good stewards of "national" lands.

- NLCS should apply consistent management principles and processes, but outcomes will be individualized to the unit.

- Land use plans should be consistent with the designating language

- NLCS as a part of BLM is the "4th corner" of conservation along with NPS, FWS, and USFS (representative of different systems, not just different agencies). Representing a spectrum and the suite of conservation system tools

- Best of the best of BLM lands and treated that way; management will be better here.

- NLCS as a learning laboratory for shifting the multiple-use paradigm toward landscape management; NLCS as a model for how to incorporate new and improved resource management on all public lands; importance of science.

- Recognize standards received by the public and other agencies and exceed them

- Heightened sensitivity toward Native American concerns

- Recognize social and environmental thresholds that can and should drive decisions.

- Increased and improved law enforcement to protect objects, values, and resources. If BLM has not enforced properly, it's partially liable for damage.

- NLCS lands as "safe places" but not the Park Service; no (or low) fees, openness, etc.

- Proactive – rather than reactive – management

- "Boots on the ground" rather than ideas and direction from Washington

- Do not fracture the landscape, but consider overall landscape, including public and private lands; manage with a mind to other lands. Manage cross-jurisdictionally where possible.

- Manage each unit according to its unique values, objects, and resources, not one-size-fits-all.

- Work with communities of interest to achieve the balance between resource protection and use, beyond planning and NEPA processes. Importance of partners and partnerships. Managing with and through partners is unique and crucial to BLM and NLCS.

- BLM must exercise realism in the face of a changing environment.

- Balance recreational uses with resource protection.

- Understanding that recreation use and tourism helps build constituencies, ownership, and support of NLCS, stewardship ethics and appreciation of values – especially partnerships with commercial visitor services providers should be encouraged and can be used to provide

opportunities for the public that they may not be able to do on their own, and they can be permitted, managed to protect resources

- o Partners will stand with us and support us – they should be given the opportunity.

- o Cost effectiveness and "bang for buck."

- o BLM is open unless there's a good reason to close (compare with NPS, which is closed unless there's a good reason to open).

- o Opportunities to discover, learn, explore, and experience. Visitors need to be more self-sufficient and plan to be more self-reliant. Facilities are minimal, closely linked to local communities, and off-unit where possible.

- o Recognition that recreation use and resource protection must be balanced, that some visitor support facilities, infrastructure and access will be necessary and the level of support infrastructure or access should be determined through the planning process

- o Help build local economies on new, innovative paradigms.

Thresholds, indicators, and compatibility

- Thresholds should be based on designating language (must be a link back to the objects, values, resources), baseline inventories (crucial), and risk analysis. Should begin by analyzing to see if certain objects, values, or resources might be degraded below thresholds and need to be restored or enhanced.
  - o Reconcile actual and perceived thresholds through data gathering and analysis and public relations, education, and information sharing. Thresholds should be as accurate as possible. Involve state agencies, universities, etc.

  - o Public education and interaction are necessary to determine thresholds and manage perceptions of compatibility

  - o Presence of invasive, non-native species and trends; fire ecology and dynamics; etc.

  - o Natural transitions (through climate change, e.g.) versus direct anthropogenic causes of change

  - o Condition of object at time of designation; or, at some baseline function; or, PFC/desired future condition.

- Indicators might include named objects, values, or resources, habitat conversion, use indicators already being used in the specializations, change in visual characteristics, change in presence of invasive species, change in wildlife populations, destruction of natural functioning ecosystem, presence of vandalism and other human-caused degradation, net gain or loss of an object, value, or resource for which an area was designated.
  - o 17 land health indicators(e.g. erosion, riparian, plan communities) – use of both quantitative and qualitative data – use this model for NLCS objects

  - o Social indicators – displacement, people seeking new areas to experience and enjoy, loss of visual resources or recreational values, etc.

  - o Fire

- Relationship between uses

  - o Compatible uses – how do we define compatibility?

    - The term itself implies accepting some degree of conflict.

- Uses that do not degrade, beyond an acceptable threshold, the objects, values, or resources for which units were designated.

- Determine "levels of acceptable change."

- Defined by science, research, and specialists.

- Uses that are economically and ecologically viable rather than marginal

- Allowable uses as defined in establishing authorities and within BLM's discretion to allow.

- Uses that do not damage objects or can be controlled to prevent damage.

- "You can only do it here": Uses that may not be allowed by other agencies, but that also do not degrade NLCS values (e.g. recreational gold mining on the Steese in AK).

- Traditional uses may or may not be compatible, and must be compared against conservation objectives. Some may have to be restricted or prohibited, but others can be modified and allowed to continue, or can even be used to help manage for conservation (e.g. grazing at Carrizo Plain National Monument).

o Purposes for which units where designated are most important, followed by recreation and visitor services, followed by extractive uses.

- Is recreation a compatible use? It depends on how and where it occurs. Many designating authorities mention recreational values as a purpose for which the unit exists, but on other units, recreation can be a cause of degradation.

- Organized vs. dispersed use

o Recognize that recreational use, tourism, and visitation are appropriate and should be allowed and even encouraged as long as they can be done with long term conservation goals and objectives

o Use and enjoyment of NLCS areas by the public for recreation, education, spiritual, and other human uses is essential to long term public support, appreciation, and stewardship of the area.

o Customize approach to managing uses for each unit; tailor to the purposes of designation.

o Use the precautionary principle when conflicts arise: burden of proof should be on BLM first meeting conservation objectives and then look at allowing uses, followed by any necessary mitigation, OR BLM, as a multiple use agency, should allow use first, and then mitigate based on conservation objectives.

o Look to land outside NLCS units to encourage uses that may be limited or restricted within NLCS units.

o Work with communities of interest to determine which uses are compatible and not, and where and when they can or cannot happen.

o Need to be responsive to social and environmental changes.

Planning and Science

- Land use plans are socio-political solutions to science questions, so the give-and-take is important to a robust process.

- Importance of having good, robust management plans that allow adaptation and nimbleness on the ground.

- But, plans take too much time and are often not implemented effectively or efficiently. Need to find a way to make planning more effective.

- Plans should start with the establishing authorities and work from there. The planning process should be used to resolve uncertainties.

- Creation of baseline inventories and conducting monitoring is critical, especially quantitative monitoring.

- Scientific research and adaptive management are/should be woven together.

- Increased opportunities for public input beyond RMP process; incorporate as part of monitoring.

- Science should be a higher priority for informing the public about BLM decisions and actions, as opposed to public desires being the driver; use as a tool to inform/educate; use as a PR opportunity.

- Use planning to bridge groups, perceptions, opinions, and to better integrate and convey the science behind decision making.

- Use planning and science as public education, interpretation, and awareness tools.

- Science should be the basis for management decisions.

- Social science is overly focused on economics and needs to balance with sociology.

- Use universities and non-BLM researchers for management applications as well as the beauty of discovery (good PR); encourage research to focus on the needs and unique aspects of the unit.

- Need to manage for economic benefit.

- How do we measure human and ecological benefits? What do they mean? Pay attention to data quality.

- Consistent planning is important – consistent within BLM and with state, tribal, inter-jurisdictional, and local plans.

- Make science permitting simpler.

What is going right (best management practices, actions for which we should provide incentives)? How can we build upon success? What are the barriers and challenges?

- Barriers and challenges
  - Communication – at all levels, internally and externally.
  - Business as usual is easier.
  - Internal and external disagreements about what NLCS should be doing.
  - Lack of understanding of the unique laws and policies that govern the NLCS; variation in those laws makes it difficult and increases the onus to manage based on place, rather than nationally.
  - Courts as ultimate decision makers / dispute resolvers versus working together to come to mutually agreed-upon solutions. Litigation and litigiousness.
  - Identifying and emphasizing areas of agreement as well as respecting diverse opinions.
  - NLCS units' place in the BLM structural hierarchy – often at or second from the bottom. Creates unrealistic expectations internally and externally.

- Business practices
  - SMART goals – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound
    - SMARTER – SMART + ecological (or engaging) and reevaluate
  - Fix the budget system: create more accurate PEs and PEs that reflect Secretarial priorities; project codes that fund one unit from one source, rather than one unit and many sources.
  - Prepare for change effectively – sustainability requires it (see CA oil spill and how to deal with it at CCNM)
  - Leverage funds, work, and equipment from partners and volunteers to make up for budget shortfalls, accomplish high-priority work, and fulfill the education and interpretation functions.
  - Practice adaptive management; use tools, technologies, and techniques that are already available to BLM before buying or contracting more. Learn to use what BLM already have.
  - Set up peer-to-peer networking for idea/best practice exchanges.
  - Maintain strong links with BLM offices and lands outside of NLCS to integrate the good work and best practices being done within the whole public lands context
  - Ensure staff includes focused specialists/coordinators reflecting the unit's unique needs, e.g. partnerships, public relations, OHV, with appropriate skill sets like facilitation, technology, etc.
  - Improve and use marketing principles to tell the story and get more support.
  - Communicate, communicate, communicate.
  - Use the process to solve the problems. It's okay that outcomes will be different in different places; apply the process consistently to create clear expectations, trust, and confidence. Okay to "press pause" sometimes, too.
- Strategic and tactical best practices/what's working:
  - Effectively collect and analyze data
    - Off-site electronic monitoring of objects, values, or resources
    - Boots on the ground
    - Use volunteers and leverage partners' energy and resources
    - Use GPRA surveys as a BMP, though they're not useful in every context
    - Increase use of visitor satisfaction surveys
    - Capture and communicate emerging issues and trends and incorporate historical data
  - Improve planning
    - Plans must incorporate the objects, resources, and values, and, if necessary, be revised.
    - Get outside input about the objects, resources, and values and how to conserve, protect, restore, or enhance each.
    - Post NEPA documents online and make them more easily searchable.
    - Make RMPs data-based rather than narrative.
    - Practice place-based NEPA.

- Focus on the existing process using hierarchies of authorities and considering other relevant factors; allow for individualized outcomes; or develop a specific process for NLCS units.

- Define protection, thresholds for degradation, indicators, how change will be managed, set out communication plans, etc.

- Maintain plans.

- Replace formal plans with goals that can be implemented; plans are cumbersome; vision and strategic goals should not change, but tactics and implementation strategies can.

o Manage resources, facilities, and uses

- Use volunteers and partners; designate full time volunteer/partner coordinators

- Promote species and habitat recovery, especially keystone species.

- Boundary markers and signed access.

- Allow closure, buy-outs, or voluntary retirement of grazing allotments; consider alternative grazing regulations for special designations.

- Recognize that lands are interconnected; be mindful of adjacent lands and their management objectives; honor the values of different management systems and try to make transitions between them seamless (see Service First).

- Fire management is critical.

- Get project proponents to participate early on in the process.

- Provide clear rules for visitors – create clear expectations and manage for them.

o Provide direct services

- Create more formal publications to inform and educate. Not necessarily just printed publications like annual reports, which are good, but online resources, podcasts, videos, etc.

- Regularly report on social and environmental research being conducted on and affecting NLCS units; find and publish historical reports that are not currently publicly available.

- Improve websites. Make them less bureaucratic and more customer-service oriented.

- Use gateway communities to provide most services.

o Monitoring – absolutely essential

- "Monitoring is like flossing"

- Incorporate historical data; focus on establishing a baseline in terms of proper functioning condition, condition at time of designation, or some other scientifically-based measure.

- Monitor objects/values/resources and uses

o Partnership and community relations

- Positive, comprehensive communication internally and externally with interested users to prevent unnecessary closure and convey reasons for necessary closures. Build and maintain trust.

- Use Resource Advisory Committees. Be mindful of FACA for non-advisory committee group work. Also broaden interactions with public beyond RACs.

- Maintain communication and cooperation at all times. Do the work up front. Address perceptions and expectations and define the decision space.

- Outfitters and guides should be viewed as partners. Need a mechanism for formalizing partnerships with them. Define "friends" more broadly.

- Nurture relationships with friends groups and partners and allow them to help educate new managers and staff; don't let other levels of the organization undermine locally-developed partnerships.

- Recognize and plan for emerging and anticipated demographic and cultural changes, including planning for and respecting Hispanics.

- Users need ownership in the resource, this helps promote conservation.

- Tell the story together rather than imposing something. Be inclusive.

- Do not lose sight of the fact that BLM is the ultimate decision-maker and administrator of the land.

- Spend time with critics and listen to them.

- Have an NLCS foundation and a formal friends group for each NM and NCA.

- Promote collaboration between communities and groups of place and interest.